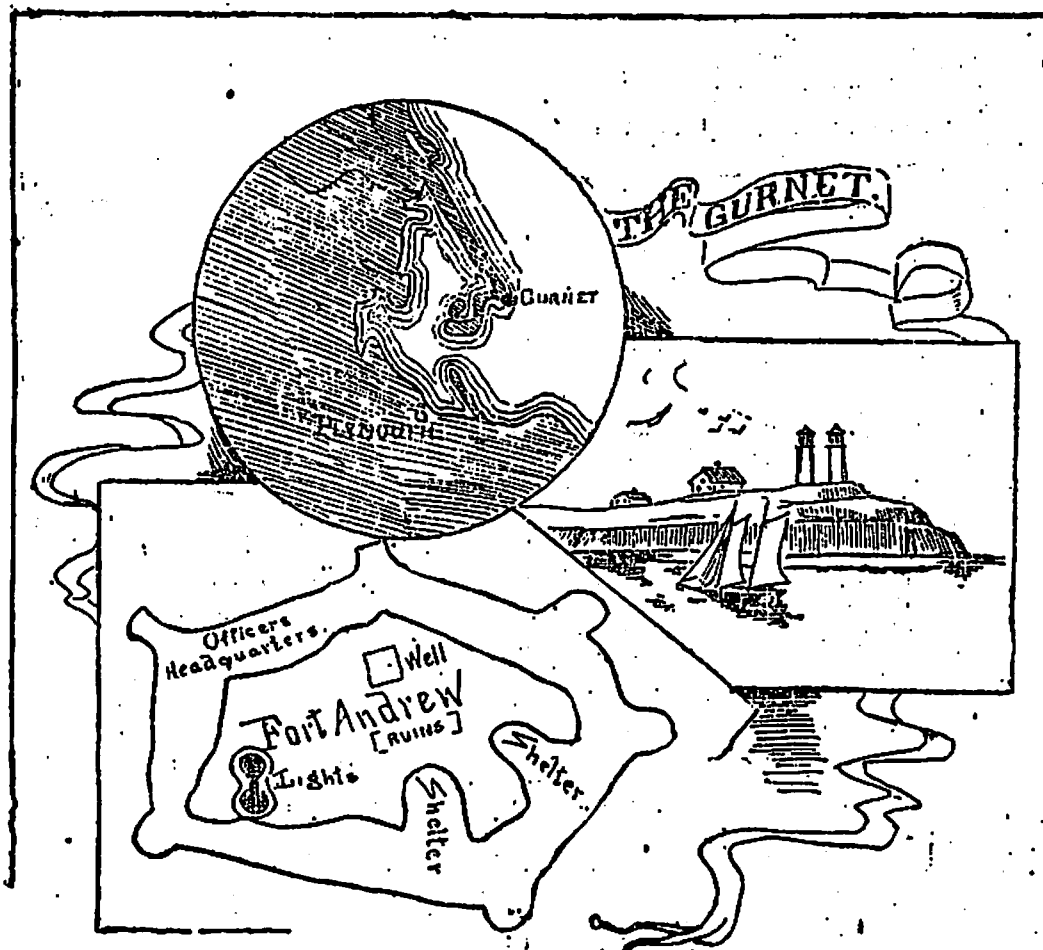


File #

# LIFE AT THE GURNET.

Lighthouse Keeper's Family and Life-Saving Crew Live There Contentedly, Though Cut Off From the World by Winter—Guns from the Old Fort Once Sank a British Man-of-War—Romances of This Isolated Bit of the South Shore.



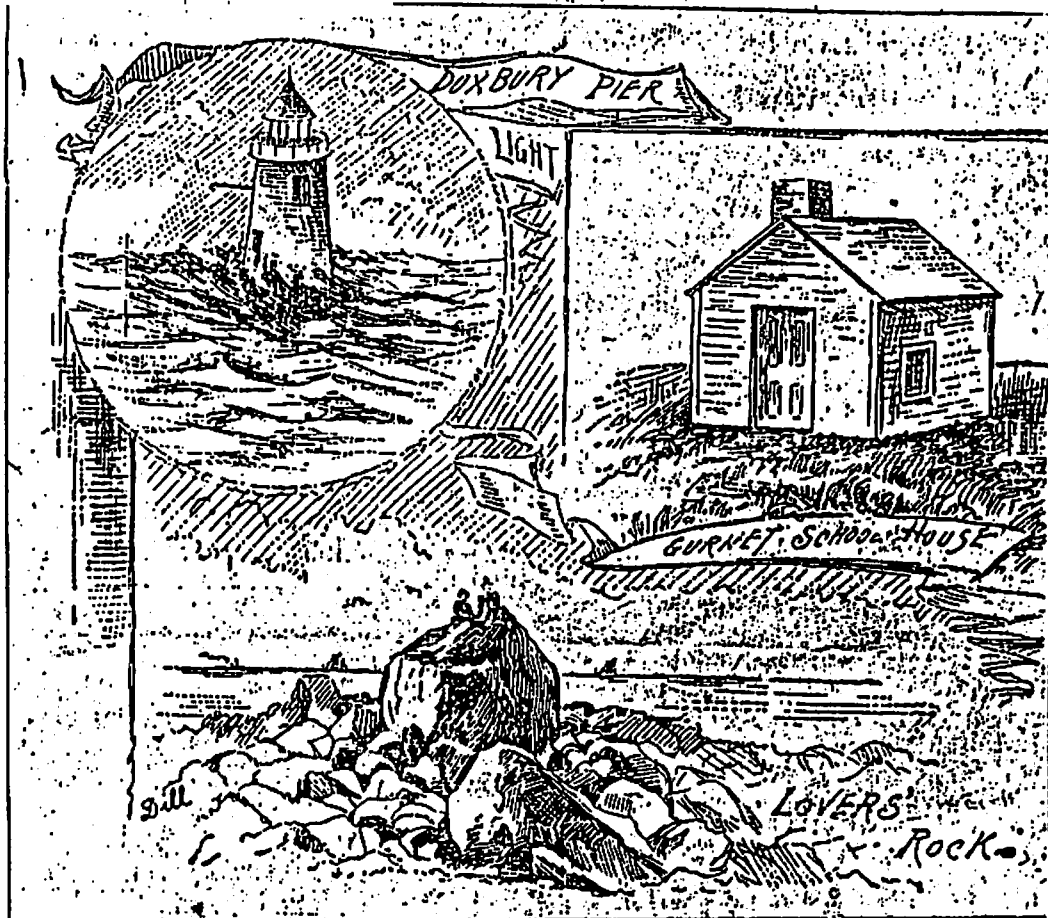
If a man stands on the top of Burial Hill, Plymouth, and looks out over the town and across the six or seven miles of water, he can see beyond Plymouth beach and Clark's Island, around which the waves whiten ceaselessly, a rocky promontory, stretching far out into the open sea, and connected with the mainland by a five-mile strip of sand.

If it be a clear day, he can descry on the easternmost elevation two white octagonal towers, and further to the north and west several farmhouses and summer cottages.

At night the scene is still beautiful,

and includes the warning light of the twin beacons, the red and green lanterns of vessels bound in and out and the twinkling house lamps here and there along the shore.

This point, where the land seems to leave off and the harbor begins, is called the Gurnet—probably named after Gurnet point, England—and the twin towers are known as the Gurnet lights. They are situated 31 feet apart, ranging NW and SE, and are 102½ feet above mean high-water mark. The lights are fixed white, and are visible at a distance of 15½ miles.



The earliest authentic mention of the Gurnet is found in an account of Champlain's voyage to America, published in 1613. It is spoken of as "almost an island," covered with trees, principally pines.

The old Icelandic manuscripts tell how Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, sailed from cape Cod toward the mainland and cast anchor not far from "a hilly promontory, overgrown with wood." "Here it is beautiful," exclaimed Thorwald, "and here I should like to fix my abode."

Some years later, in 1001, the Norse king was fatally wounded during a battle with the Indians.

"Take me to the promontory where I thought to have my abode," he said to his warriors. "There you shall bury me and plant there two crosses, one at my head and one at my feet, and call the place Krosaness, for all time coming."

The exact location of the promontory of the crosses is believed by antiquaries to be one of the two prominent headlands between cape Cod and cape Ann, either the Gurnet or Point Allerton. Kohl, De Costa, Guillot and others favor the latter, though Champlain's description gives substance to the belief that the Gurnet is the burial place of Thorwald.

Jan 7, 1638, It is recorded that "the court hath granted that Clark's Island, Plymouth beach, Squish and Gurnet's nose shall be and remain unto the town of Plymouth with the woods thereon."

In December, 1636, Sir Edmund Andros, commissioned by King James as royal governor of New England, gave Clark's Island to one of his most subservient followers, Dr Nathaniel Clark of Plymouth. For years the island had been used for the support of the town poor, and the people, much incensed by this unjust grant, brought suit for the recovery of the property.

As matters were growing worse, William and Mary supplanted the

Stuart dynasty, whereupon the citizens revolted, seized Andros, Clark and others and sent them back to England.

In 1694 the Gurnet was sold to John Dole, John Nelson and Samuel Lucas, to assist in defraying the expenses of the lawsuit.

During the revolution earthworks were built there by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury, and maintained with a garrison of 60 men until the close of the war. In 1812 the fort was occupied by the state militia, who on one occasion sank a British war vessel which came within gunshot.

The Gurnet may be reached from Plymouth by boat when the weather is favorable, or overland by way of Powderpoint bridge, Duxbury. The trip by water is pleasanter, for the beach roads are very sandy and the distance twice as far.

In winter, when the "cow yard" is frozen into a solid mass and the peninsula almost surrounded by huge cakes of ice piled high on the shore, the inhabitants of Gurnet point, for weeks at a time, are cut off from all communication with the outer world.

The surfmen who patrol the shore from Gurnet light to Powder point, the lighthouse keeper who stands by his beacons in preference to everything else, and the few channel fishermen and clam diggers who remain during the season of snow, ice and northeast gales, form a cheerful, contented community, even though duty compels them to live an isolated life.

Besides the lighthouse and life-saving station, the other objects of interest are the ruined fort and earthworks, the deep well, where the garrison obtained water, the government sea wall, Lover's rock, the scene of a tragic suicide, the huts of the fishermen, picturesque gunning stands, the Gurnet schoolhouse, and, a half mile distant, historic Clark's island, the summer home of Prof Goodwin of Harvard.

Globe man entered the dining room where several of the surfmen were seated about a long center table.

The first relief had just returned and the second was on its way out. Steward Chase was preparing supper in the kitchen, but in spite of the writer's protest left his work and showed his visitor through the building.

The new station was built in 1892 at a cost of \$6400. The old one, built in 1874, was removed to Saquish beach and is now used as a boathouse. The exact location of the present station is lat. 42° 10' and Long 70° 36' 10'.

On the first floor is the kitchen, a roomy dining room, the keeper's office and the boathouse. Upstairs are two large sleeping apartments and several closets.

Besides the life and surf boats were two handcars, one of which is always in readiness. It contained hawsers of 1000 yards or more, tackles, shot-line box, the polished bronze gun, a haversack or pouch containing little bags of

powder of different sizes, 38-pound shot and cartridges, a speaking trumpet and two signal flags. In the further corner of the room was a shear-shaped trestle, about 16 feet high, for elevating the shore end of the life rope, and a sand anchor to fasten the guy rope to. A horse is kept at the station to draw the boat carriage and wagons to and from the beach. The reporter found Capt John F. Holmes at his cozy little office, putting the final touches to his weekly



CAPT. JOHN F. HOLMES,  
Keeper of the Gurnet Life-Saving Sta.

report. He is a large man, with gray mustache and black hair and apparently a shade over 65 years of age. He has

been in the life-saving service for 20 years. His crew is as follows:

1. Augustus B. Rogers, 37 years .... 4th season
2. Daniel J. Graftum, 33 years ..... 5th season
3. Augustus Hadaway, 25 years ..... 2d season
4. Orick A. Robbins, 43 years ..... 2d season
5. Joseph L. Wixon, 42 years ... no previous service.

6. Charles F. Stranger, 37 years .... 4th season
  7. Joseph B. Thurston, 47 years .... 15th season
- Steward, Elsieba F. Chase, hired by crew at their expense.

"Our chief work here," said Capt Holmes, "is relieving stranded vessels. I made 19 reports last year on assistance rendered in this way. Some were small boats in distress, and several times we brought crews ashore. The men are paid \$60 a month, except No. 7, who gets \$65. We use the clock system only on the sunset patrol. From sunrise to sunset the day watch is on duty.

"The first relief goes on from sunset to 8 p. m., the second from 8 to 12, the third from midnight to 4 a. m., and the next from 4 to sunrise. Each relief con-

sists of two men, one who patrols hill and mouth of channel and the other the ocean beach. The beach patrol given a brass shield-shaped tag, which he exchanges with the Brant. F. patrolman at a halfway house, 3 1/2 n from here, not far from Duxbury bridge. The men meet there and stop a few minutes, and then return to their station.

"We have no telephone here, and we wish to send a letter or dispatch either goes by water or is delivered one of my men to the Brant Rock man, who posts it at the nearest office.

"We have drills for every day in week from Aug. 1 to June 1. Monday and Thursdays is apparatus drill Wednesday flag drill.

It was after 11 o'clock when The Globe man bade the keeper good night sought his comfortable room at Elsenor's. The wind was blowing and conditions were favorable for a severe storm before morning. At midnight the wind had increased in fury and and sleet were beating fiercely against the windowpanes. The sound was unlike "stage thunder," only a thousand times louder.

Plymouth bay was enveloped in darkness. The red beacon at Duxbury was the only light visible. The dashed wildly upon the rocks and buoy off the shoals moaned dismally.

The light from the towers, illumined the hill as far as the life-saving station.

"Presently there came in sight a covey form, lantern in hand, trudging slowly along the bow of the precipice. It was Joseph Thurston, No. 7, the best man on the crew, commencing four-hour vigil. Hastily donning a skin suit the reporter hurried down stairs and caught up with the surfman at the entrance to fort Andrew. "I storm increases, I may have to use this thing," said "Joe," pointing to a billy-like stick which he carried over his shoulder. "This is a Costo: nal, a powerful red light which no water nor wind can extinguish. When a wreck is discovered the signal

Early on a recent afternoon a Globe reporter started to spend the night at the Gurnet, to inspect the lighthouses and life-saving station, and go with the patrolmen upon their weary vigil along the beach. The staunch Jersey surfboat, with all sails set, was at the wharf in Plymouth, awaiting the reporter's arrival. Capt Holmes extended a cordial welcome and bade the reporter take a seat in the bow beside surfmen No. 6 and No. 3.

In the boat, besides the captain, the crew and The Globe man, were two ladies, residents of the Gurnet. The boat was pretty well ballasted with groceries, provisions, lumber and a large parlor stove, which the captain had purchased at Plymouth.

At 3.30 the boat was abreast of Duxbury pier light, a 75-foot structure built on solid rock, almost in the very center of the inner harbor. The tower is constructed of plate iron, lined with brick and cement. This beacon is red and is kept by George Jamieson, who married the daughter of keeper Elsener of Gurnet lights.

Half an hour later the surf boat slid gently upon the sandy beach before the lifesaving station. The ladies were taken off and the supplies removed just as the lamps flashed forth their warning from the lighthouse.

"Whose sunset is it?—better be going!" shouted Capt Holmes, and forthwith two patrolmen started for the station to don their rubber boots and oilskins, leaving the rest of the crew to remove the boat from the water.

The two men were Hadaway, No. 3, who took the ocean beach, and Robbins, No. 4, who patrolled the hill and mouth of the channel.

The Globe reporter left the group on the beach after the boat was brought ashore and proceeded to the home of Capt A. G. Elsener, keeper of Gurnet lights, whose guest he was to be for the night. Capt Elsener's name is familiar to many Globe readers, who recall the wreck of the Aquatic at Cuttyhunk in February, 1893, and of the schooner Rob and Harry, during the following March.

It was Capt Elsener of the Humane society at Cuttyhunk, who, with a volunteer crew, put out to the Rob and Harry and rescued several seamen. Many on the beach discouraged the idea of trying to reach the wreck, the surf was boiling with such terrible fury, but the Cuttyhunk boys again proved that where human lives are at stake, they think only of rescue and not of danger.

It was Capt Elsener who officiated in the absence of a clergyman and read the first 16 verses of St John xiv at the grave of the dead sailor. For this rescue at the peril of his life, he was the recipient of special honors from the government.

At the supper table Keeper Elsener gave a brief outline of his past life. He was born in Maine, and has followed the sea in different capacities from Maine, Gloucester and other ports. He was master of a vessel for 10 years.

At the age of 24 he entered the lighthouse service at Thatcher's Island as assistant keeper and was stationed there eight years. He went next to Cuttyhunk as principal keeper for four years and then came to the Gurnet two years and a half ago. His family consists of his wife, one son at school in Duxbury and a daughter, Mrs Jamieson.



A. G. EISENER,

Keeper of the Gurnet Lights.

Keeper Elsener is well posted on the early history of Gurnet lights.

"They were established in 1769," said he, "and have never to my knowledge been rebuilt. The lights are of the fourth order and the lens cost, I think, between \$700 and \$800. The two lights consume 300 gallons of kerosene in one year. Visitors are allowed in the houses two hours each day, excepting Sundays and holidays. My routine duties are to

light the lamps at sunset, change them at midnight and extinguish them at sunrise, to trim and fill the lamps and wipe off lens and window glass; that is, to keep everything in the best possible condition."

The keepers of Gurnet lights within 100 years have been: Thomas Burgess,

Joseph Burgess, Thomas Treble, William Sears, Milton Reamy (went from Gurnet to Minot's), Edward S. Gorham, Henry L. Pingree (transferred to Boston light), and A. G. Elsener.

It is but a few minutes' walk from the lights to the life-saving station. The sky was overcast and the wind was strong from the southeast, when The

nited by percussion. The surfman y the beacon over his head, to notify vessel that help is at hand, and for the station to give the alarm." For the rest of the watch reporter surfman threaded their way among rocks.

"How does this compare with the severest weather?" gasped the reporter when the station was reached. "O, this is nothing," answered No. 7 with a laugh; "in winter we have snow and ice and even an old hand finds it difficult to keep a footing on these cliffs. It is quite good walking on the beach at low tide when it is frozen."

Just before daybreak the wind shifted and the sun rose bright and clear. With keeper Elsener The Globe man ascended the three flights of stairs leading to the light and took a survey of the landscape. Across the entrance of the harbor was Manomet bluff, to the west was Plymouth town, with its Forefathers' rock, Faith monument, the wharves, rope walks and factories; at South Duxbury, to the northwest, was the Miles Standish monument and to the north Duxbury beach, Cut river and Brant Rock. Oceanward the low, black arm of cape Cod was barely visible and the procession of vessels passing between the cape and Boston could also be dimly seen.

Below the towers are the ruins of fort Andrew. These earthworks were thrown up during the revolution, rebuilt in 1812 and remodeled in 1861 or 62. Seven or eight mounted cannon were left in charge of a sergeant during the civil war. The embankment walls are about 15 feet high in front and eight feet high inside. Bomb and shell-proof shelters were constructed within the fort, but time and other levelers have obliterated all but two.

The Gurnet lights are in the southwest corner of the inclosure and the keeper's residence a few rods outside. A well 65 feet deep still supplies the government employes with water, as it did over a century ago.

East of Gurnet light is the immense boulder known as "lover's rock." The tale runs in this way:

Eunice Burgess was the daughter of "Uncle Joe" Burgess, who kept the lights in 1812. At the age of 16 she fell in love with one of the soldiers at the fort, but her father would not consent to the marriage. The young girl grew despondent, and, escaping from the house, jumped from the big boulder into the sea and was washed away with the tide.

Prof Goodwin, the distinguished Greek scholar, owns a cottage there, and nearby is "Pulpit Rock," where the shallopload of Pilgrims held their Sabbath services before attempting to land at Plymouth.

With the exception of a few summer cottages, the only habitation between the Gurnet and Powder point is "Hotel de Pines," the residence of Thomas Hannigan. The house is situated among the sand dunes, a few rods from the ocean. Tom enjoys his hermit life, and when any one asks whether he owns property or not, he points to a wooden sign, given him by the owner of Duxbury beach, reading: "This house is only for Thos. Hannigan and H. Blake's use. W. J. Wright."



"HOTEL DE PINES."  
The Only House on Duxbury Beach.